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Healing in Little Lhasa

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It is a quiet evening in Mcleodganj in Dharamsala, the exiled Tibetans' Little Lhasa. The Tibetans left the real Lhasa in 1959 after a revolt to protest the occupation of Tibet by China. Since then they have called the Little Lhasa their home. The sky is a beautiful shade of purple, blue, and orange. The tiny houses with variegated tin roofs in the valley below look like an artist's canvas strewn with colours. The air is filled with a soft whisper of pine leaves brushing against each other in the mild breeze. It is the perfect time to step out of the hotel room, I reckon. After spending an entire day glued to the bed, unable to convince myself to move even an inch except for a few trips

to the washroom, the idea of an evening walk seems therapeutic. It is one of those days when my body and mind refuse to coordinate.

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On these difficult days, I drown in my sorrows, playing and replaying the past events in my head until I lose control of myself and spiral down an abyss. Consequently, I struggle to perform the daily chores. Office leaves exhaust, clothes pile up on a chair in one corner of my room, dishes tower up in the kitchen sink, dust accumulates on the shelves and on the books, dark circles crowd under my eyes and pimples fight for spots on my skin. Life entirely loses its vigour and meaning. But after a few days, at times a week, I miraculously regain the strength to pull myself out of bed for longer hours and straighten the self-created mess. Every time, I wonder how I survive the filth.

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I take a warm bath and order some tea and snacks. In the meantime, I put on a light pink jacket, slip my swollen feet into a pair of grey socks and purple sneakers and sling my olive green corduroy bag with some money for dinner, my cell phone, and a small bottle of water. My love for colours, which is reflected in my choice of clothes, accessories, bags, shoes, and everything else, earned me the title of a “hippie” in college. And I didn’t mind because I wanted to live like one, travelling and not rooting down in a place. I had small dreams and no plans. Ayon, on the other hand, craved for stability. His clothes were mostly monochromatic, grey, white, or black. I loved watching movies and painting. He liked reading books and brooding. Despite our differences, we somehow clicked in college and stayed madly in love until he decided to leave. But in those years when we were together, we painted the town red with our love.

The tea and snacks arrive just in time. The knock on the door nudges me out of my thoughts. I unlatch the door and let the housekeeping staff in. I push aside the knickknacks on the tabletop beside my bed and gesture to him to place the tray on it. He obeys and exits the room after squinting at the mess. I pour myself a cup of tea and taking a sip, dig my teeth into the piping hot paneer pakoras. Feeling a bit energized, I hit the meandering mountainous road leading to the Dalai Lama's temple. I walk past rows of shops on either side of the road selling Tibetan artifacts, woollens, jewellery, umbrellas, and thangka paintings. Although I am drawn to the colourful jewellery and the thangka paintings, I resist and remind myself of the dozens of junk jewellery sitting in a drawer in my apartment in Delhi, waiting to be worn on that special occasion that somehow never arrives, and the paintings that still need to be framed and hung on the walls. I would come back another time, I assure myself and resume my walk.

As I walk past the shops, I glance at the Tibetan women guarding the items in their shops and at the same time chit-chatting with each other in the Tibetan language. One woman pours hot tea or coffee or butter tea from a thermos in two small paper cups. She takes a sip from one and hands the other to the woman in the next shop. Meanwhile, both of them burst into a bout of laughter, perhaps at a joke that one of them cracks, precariously balancing the cups between their index fingers and thumbs. Their piercing laughter rings in the air, attracting the attention of a few passersby. I, too, cannot refrain from tittering.

I reach the entrance of the temple after sauntering for a few yards but decide to explore the surroundings first. Many Tibetans are out on, what I first think, their evening walks. But they are actually praying and circumambulating the perimeter wall of the Dalai Lama's residence in exile, an act they consider holy and equivalent to circumambulating holy places in their lost homeland Tibet.

I tread on the serpentine, undulating road, often crossing old Tibetan ladies with prayer wheels in their hands and perhaps the prayer *om mane padme hum* on their lips. They don brightly hued pangdens[1] over long chubas[2] and occasionally smile when someone greets them. "How adorable!" I exclaim when I near two such old women effortlessly climbing up a slope holding prayer beads and leaning on walking sticks. One of them wears shoes matching her long-sleeved blouse underneath her grey *chuba*.

Tashi delek! I greet them as my eyes meet theirs and they greet me back, flashing toothless grins. I notice the wrinkles on their faces, which are like the spread-out roots of an old, sagacious ficus tree. They must be around eighty years old, I surmise. I halt for a while, panting for breath. Cold drops of sweat trickle down my bosom and my brow. A mild sense of shame engulfs me as I spot the old women disappearing at the bend of the road, ahead of me. "No more junk food," I tell myself and feeling resolute continue on the road.

I pass many maroon-robed monks and nuns in the alley behind the temple. I see some people rotate the prayer wheels with inscriptions of om mane padme hum, installed on the sidewalk. I imitate them, muttering a prayer under my breath. A nun behind me perhaps notices my discomfort in moving the heavy wheel and tapping on my shoulder says, "Rotate it like this," and rotates one of the wheels holding the wooden base with all her strength. I smile and thank her. The petite nun with a shaven head and flawless skin simpers, bows, and continues with her prayers. "How can one be so dedicated towards their religion to renounce everything on earth? I am incapable of even sticking to a diet to lose weight," I wonder aloud.

I continue on the road, occasionally stopping to click pictures of the breathtaking views of Dharamsala below, the alluring cloud-kissed Dhauladhar range at a distance, and the vibrant Tibetan prayer flags fluttering in the wind or the stones

painted red, blue, and yellow and embellished with Tibetan prayers. I notice a few tourists behind me click pictures at the exact spots. My feet ache from all the walking, but I resist sitting on the rickety wooden benches perhaps meant for weary and unfit travellers like me. The temple is only half a kilometre away, and if I sit to rest, it will be dark before I take a tour of the premises, I calculate.

The evening begins to descend on the mountains surrounding the temple. The meandering roads far away begin to disappear with the fading daylight. Only lights from moving vehicles glow from behind the thick blanket of conifers now and then, appearing like a swarm of glowworms. Bright lights beam at the construction site beside the temple to aid the workers complete the project, a ropeway connecting the adjacent mountains. It would ferry people to and from the temple, I hear people talking. I picture the completed ropeway and an overcrowded cable car zipping over the gorge innumerable times a day and shudder at the thought of the ropeway snapping in the middle or people getting stranded hundreds of feet above the valley due to some reason. I am into the habit of dwelling in negativity and imagining the worst out of a situation. I am good at it.

I head towards the entrance of the temple, brushing aside my dark thoughts. After passing through the security check, I alight the short flight of steps and usher into a wide area divided into two parts with iron railings. One part has sitting arrangements and the other part has rows of wooden planks arranged side by side for the Tibetans to prostrate in front of the Buddha. The premises are full of Tibetans — sitting, walking, talking, prostrating, and circumambulating. Prostrating on the wooden planks prevents their clothes from getting dirty in the dust. In Tibet, people prostrate on the ground outside the Jokhang temple. Their clothes turn white with dust, I recall from watching a documentary about Tibet.

The praying Tibetans around me appear unperturbed by the crowd of Indian tourists clicking pictures with their cameras everywhere as if it were not a temple but a tourist spot. It has turned into one. Most Indian tourists are irresponsible, I conclude. They do not respect the rules of the places they visit. I get agitated. In historical monuments, lovers scribble their names on pillars and walls. Some etch their phone numbers on the walls for reasons I do not know. Some adorn the nooks and corners of beautiful monuments with vermilion spit from chewing betel nut with lime. Disgusting. I am certain the Tibetans are tired of disciplining the Indian tourists and have eventually chosen to ignore them.

I notice a White person sitting on the steps and copiously taking notes while talking to an old Tibetan man. He might be a researcher or a journalist, I presume. A flock of curious Indian tourists surround them. I am certain they are waiting to click selfies with the White tourist. “One selfie please, Sir,” they would plead. He would politely decline or oblige.

A group of boys are huddled together and babbling at the top of their voices right in front of the prostrating Tibetans. I overhear them bickering over the place they would go partying later in the evening. There is a difference of opinion over choosing from the handful of nightclubs in Mcleodganj. The discussion turns into a subtle argument soon. Discotheques in Mcleodganj? Isn’t this supposed to be a holy place? I quickly browse the Internet to soothe my curiosity. Google suggests four or five. Tradition and modernity dwell side by side, I analyse. A staff, who had been observing the boys for a while, intervenes and politely requests them to disperse. They do not pay any heed initially but reluctantly move away after an old Tibetan woman lashes out at them sternly.

I take a quick walk around the temple and settle on a bench with a view of the shrine inside. I sit still for a while and fix my gaze at the golden Buddha statue. It gleams like real gold in the flickering light of the butter lamps. The countenance of the

Buddha appears tranquil, unaffected by the surrounding dishevelment. He sits in a meditative pose, eyes half open or perhaps half closed. His followers sincerely pray in front of him. I wonder if he ever listens to anyone's prayers. I say mine anyway.

A group of monks in maroon robes and yellow hats sit facing the Buddha and chant in a rhythmic unison in an indecipherable language. The deep chants are interspersed with the sounds of gongs and cymbals reverberating in the air, rendering a soul-soothing touch to the surroundings. The monks, too, seem impervious to the cacophony that prevails. A few young monks scan the crowd outside in between their chants. They appear a little distracted.

A shrill voice jolts me awake from my thoughts. I look up and see an old woman — the one who flayed the young tourists for creating a ruckus. She slumps into the space beside me and flashes a toothless grin. She rests her walking stick on the side of the bench and cautiously places her knapsack on her lap like placing a baby.

We sit in silence and exchange a few smiles and glances. She breaks the ice between us and asks me, "What worries you, my girl? Perhaps noticing the lines on my brow. I have the habit of frowning always, irrespective of anything, which renders me a grumpy visage. I shift uncomfortably in my seat and say, "Nothing Grandma."

She shakes her head and looks away from me to observe two children making funny gestures at each other. Their parents are engrossed in clicking selfies. Turning to me again, she says, "No matter what is bothering you, you will find peace since you have come to the Buddha. I have always sought solace in him in my difficult times." I want to respond but do not. Instead, I ask her, "When did you come to India?" assuming she was born in Tibet and escaped to India after the Chinese occupation of Tibet. All the first-generation Tibetan

refugees living in India escaped after 1959, I read in a book. The second- and third-generation Tibetans were born in exile. She validates my guess saying, “I came in 1959, following our guru, the Dalai Lama. It has been sixty years in India.”

The old woman’s words kindle a curiosity in me. I only read about the Tibetans on the Internet and books. I want to listen to her story, but I don’t want to intrude since she seems to be occupied in her prayers. I fidget and play with my fingerrings for a while. Then, unable to curb my curiosity further, I plead, “If you don’t mind, please tell me your story, Grandma.” She shrugs her shoulders and says grimacingly, “My story is not important, I am too old.” Since she appears disinterested, I do not pester her and remain quiet.

The old woman mutters something inaudible and unzips her bag to pull out two chocolates and a small packet of snacks. By then, the two children approach her. They do not say anything but keep giggling, amused at only they know what. The old woman ruffles their hair with her bony fingers and steals a few kisses. They momentarily hug her tight in return. She hands out the chocolates to them and advises them to stay near their parents, who have shifted their attention from clicking selfies to their children. The children snatch the chocolates and scoot.

The old woman chortles and says, “Children’s hearts are as pure the Buddha’s.” I nod in agreement. She opens the packet of snacks and offers me some. I pick up a few pieces and thank her. She nibbles on the snacks. I munch and observe her. She is a short, plump woman with hair as white as snow. The wrinkles on her face and hands resemble the creases on a crumpled sheet of paper. She is clad in a dull beige shirt and an ash-coloured *chuba*. A multicoloured horizontally striped *pangden* is wound around her waist. Her socks are pink underneath her mud-stained white sneakers. The shoes ease her walk from her house to the temple, she tells me. Her knapsack is a deep shade of purple. I have noticed school-

going girls in the vicinity carrying similar ones. Maybe, it belongs to her granddaughter who got bored of the style and upgraded to a trendier one, handing the old one down to her grandmother. I remember handing down my purses and vanity bags during my teenage years to my maternal grandmother. She would carry them to wedding parties or the market. I was close to her and accompanied her wherever she went. I often miss her. She died of old age. The old woman brought back memories of my grandmother.

"I lost my firstborn, a girl, when she was just four years old," the old woman suddenly says, tugging me out of my reverie. I wonder what makes her divulge such an intimate detail to a stranger. I turn my attention towards her. When she is assured that I am all ears, she continues, "I was young and ignorant back then." I notice her eyes moistening. "I fled from Tibet to India with my parents, braving the snow-covered Himalayas after the Chinese occupation. We walked all day and stopped only at night to rest in the fear of being swallowed up by gorges. We walked for a month, hungry and exhausted, before reaching Nepal. My mother lost the fingers of her feet to frostbite and led a difficult life in exile. Once we were sent to India from Nepal, my father worked as a road construction labourer in Manali to support the family. I, too, assisted him, while our mother stayed back in the tent with my younger siblings. I was eleven years old then. Two years later, I was married to a man I never met before. He was the son of an acquaintance of my father. Their family, too, had escaped into exile. Had it been in Tibet, there would have been a big celebration and plenty of gifts. Here, it was a small affair."

The snacks dry up my throat. I pull out the bottle of water from my bag and take a big gulp. I offer the bottle of water to the old woman, but she declines. She folds the packet of snacks and places it back in the knapsack, still narrating, "I moved to Dharamsala with my husband to start a new life. While he waited tables in a hotel, I stayed at home and took

care of the house." Sometimes, I would go on rallies and protests against the Chinese.

As the old woman continues to narrate, I imagine a younger version of her scurrying around a two-room, tin-roofed cozy house perched on the hills. I imagine her cooking, cleaning, and washing repeatedly for days, months, and years. I imagine her as a coy wife serving hot meals to her husband at night and folding dumplings in the morning. I picture her cheeks catching colour when her husband held her hand after their marriage. I also imagine her as a fiery young woman waving Tibetan flags, shouting slogans, and passionately demanding *Rangzen.* [3]

While I am lost in my imagination, the old woman is engrossed in narrating her story. I curtail my imagination and try to concentrate. She says, "A year after our marriage, I gave birth to a girl. I named her Pema." "At fourteen years of age!" I exclaim. She chuckles. "Yes. I was very young. But in those times, it was common." My grandmother was married at seventeen and started having children by eighteen. I thought that was too early for a woman, rather a girl, to marry. I am flummoxed.

I cannot imagine a child raising another one, that too, a tiny pink ball of flesh and blood. At that age, I remember being confused about picking a red or a blue dress for my birthday. She cradled a baby in her arms at an age when most girls play with dolls. Being a woman is difficult, I conclude. Oblivious to my thoughts about her, she keeps narrating, "My world revolved around her. My Pema was healthy and beautiful. She was a happy child."

Hearing the old woman refer to her daughter in the past tense, I immediately understand that she is no more. Blood rushes to my face. I fiddle with the string of my sling bag and then on an impulse clasp her hand. She looks disconsolate, and without lifting her eyes, says, "My husband was away on work. He

trusted me with our child. But I was young and stupid," she repeats. "I went to the kitchen to fix myself a meal while Pema was asleep. I did not realize that I left the front door ajar after fetching water from the nearby spring. I don't know when Pema woke up and walked out of the house. Our house was on a hilltop. The road was steep and muddy due to the incessant rains. When I came to check on Pema after a few minutes, my heart began hammering in my chest when I did not see her on the bed. I dropped the bowl of food and rushed out of the house. I frantically searched for Pema, but she was nowhere to be found. Then I heard a commotion near the spring, and a neighbour rushed towards our house carrying little Pema in his arms. "She tumbled down the slope of the hill. Where is Tenzin? We have to take her to the hospital," they screamed, their voices overlapping.

I look into her doleful eyes. Her lips quiver, and she struggles to fight back her tears. But she continues, "I was too nervous to respond and froze. The neighbours shook me and told me to get some money. I ran into the kitchen and pulled out the bundle of notes that I kept inside the container of rice. By then, a crowd had gathered. Our Pema was loved. Someone checked on Pema and declared, 'She is breathing.' I heaved a sigh of relief. With the neighbours' help, I rushed Pema to the hospital in Dharamsala, holding her close to my bosom all the time. I wished my husband was near me. I felt utterly helpless. The doctors attended to her immediately. I sat beside her and refused to move. She opened her eyes for some time that evening. The doctors said Pema would have to be moved to Delhi the next morning. In the meantime, someone informed my husband about the incident. That night, Pema developed a fever and remained unconscious. I prayed and prayed for my Pema to wake up. The next morning, I was woken up by a furore. I saw the doctors and nurses run helter-skelter and sensed something was wrong. But they barred me from staying near Pema. 'She is having convulsions,' they kept saying. I was confused. I didn't understand what it meant. I

prayed frantically. But in a few minutes, all the commotion died, and the movements slowed. They declared Pema dead. They said she suffered a serious head injury from the fall. My little healthy, happy, beautiful Pema left me forever."

The old woman lets out muffled sobs and wipes her tears with the sleeve of her blouse. "I am sorry," I say. She purses her lips, and then the corners of her mouth draw apart to form a halfhearted smile. I am at a loss for words. I am not good at comforting anyone. Situations of grief always numb me. Although I want to speak a few words, I swallow them, fearing that I would say something insensitive. After all the hardships the old woman has been through, hurting her with insensitive words is the last thing on my agenda.

My eyes moisten, too. The old woman notices me and clasps back my hand. She does not utter anything but lets out a long, sorrowful sigh. Darkness veils the mountains around the temple. The tourists begin to disperse. The chanting continues, and the monks play the gongs and cymbals occasionally. The Tibetans continue to circumambulate, rotating the giant prayer wheels.

We sit in silence for some time before she asks, "What worries you?" "Nothing," I say. But as an afterthought, I share my story with her. "I have come to the hills to seek solace, to cleanse my soul of the burden I have been carrying for a long time," I begin, and she listens eagerly. "I lost my partner a few years back. His name was Ayon," I say, and a lump forms in my throat.

"Oh! dear," she exclaims. Her eyes reveal both sympathy and concern for me. "We were the happiest couple on earth. I still fail to comprehend what happened," I continue. "If only he had shared with me what bothered him, I would have prevented him from taking that extreme step. For the past two years, I have been frantically searching for answers to the many questions I have. Why did he do that? What was

bothering him? But I have failed miserably to get answers." I bury my face in the cup of my hands and sob. She looks at me, helplessly. I wipe the tears rolling down my cheeks and continue, "Maybe I was responsible. Maybe I said something that bothered him. Maybe he wasn't happy with me but was kind enough to not hurt me by revealing the truth. After Ayon's demise, the entire world turned against me. His family and friends, my friends and family, everyone started to blame me. Maybe I was responsible. I can never forgive myself," I say and sob inconsolably. The old woman rubs my back. "Please don't cry. Time will heal everything," she tries to console me. I compose myself and straighten my tousled hair. A mild throbbing pain in my head begins to bother me.

Although surrounded by people, I feel utterly lonely. I wish Ayon was near me. I picture us sitting together on the bench and deciding where to head next. He would have insisted on having greasy Indian food for dinner, and I would have disapproved. We would have taken a long walk holding hands, occasionally stealing kisses. We would have watched the television later at night and planned the next day's activities. He would have pretended to fall asleep and when I would have turned around, he would have embraced me. We would have made love and fallen asleep in each other's arms. I would have looked at his serene face and fallen in love with him a zillionth time. The thoughts frustrate me and make me want to snatch him back from the clutches of time.

Perhaps the old woman reads my mind. "Thinking about him will make things worse for you," she says. "You should forgive yourself and move on in life. There is no point searching for answers when you know all you will do is hit the dead-end every time," she adds. I nod but say nothing. "Please don't blame yourself. Some situations are beyond our control," she assures me. She keeps holding my hand and runs her fingers through my ponytail. Silence prevails for a while. "It's difficult to cope with loss. But not impossible. No one can understand

your grief. Hence, you have to forgive yourself and let yourself heal. Dwell on the beautiful memories of the days you two spent together. Brush aside the dark thoughts. You can train your mind to do that. It is easier said than done, I know. But try. Turn to the Buddha, and he will help you."

I appreciate the sincerity in her words. Although dwelling in deep anguish, her words soothe me. I feel a sense of calm. We sit in silence, while I ponder how we are different in many ways — age, religion, ethnicity, values, and culture — yet connected by the invisible thread of love, loss, tragedy, and grief. Another commonality that we share is the tendency to blame ourselves for the unfortunate incidents in our lives. Furthermore, the old woman has nearly completed her journey of healing whereas I have not yet begun. Our destination is the same but our journeys are entirely different.

The whooshing sound of the cold wind pierces through the pine needles and reaches our ears. Seeing me adjust my jacket, she suggests, "It is getting colder and darker. We should leave. Nights are quite cold in Mcleodganj." "Yes," I concede. We both rise. She picks up her walking stick, wears her knapsack, and, holding my hand, leads me toward the prayer wheels. She walks gingerly, half limping and half dragging her feet. My ankles hurt, too, from all the walking.

"Rotate these wheels as I do and pray to the Buddha to heal you. I will pray for you, too," she says. "Despite all the odds that life hurls at us, we must stand tall like the mighty Himalayas. Life is long, and we eventually learn to deal with our sorrows. Make them your strength, not your weakness. Forgive the ones you can, and forget the ones you cannot. Most important, forgive yourself," she advises me. I rotate the prayer wheels. I pray as I move from one wheel to the next. When we complete a circle and stand facing the glistening face of the Buddha, I feel placid.

The old woman offers her prayers and drops a hundred rupee note in a donation box. After taking the last bow in front of the golden statue, we both exit the temple. “Where will you go from here?” She asks me. I tell her about the hotel where I am put up. I also share with her my intent to join the week-long healing program.

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After Ayon left, I led a secluded life, kept changing cities and switching jobs, thinking life would change with a change of place. But the pain in my chest kept lingering and weighing me down. The grief consumed me. But then a point came when I realized that the change must come from within. Around the same time, I overheard a conversation about Dharamsala from a group of colleagues during a lunch break. Apparently, some of them have had life-changing experiences after attending a healing program at a Tibetan institute. I began reading extensively about Dharamsala, the healing program, the Tibetans in exile, and the Dalai Lama, and I was drawn towards the place. After some research, I enrolled myself in the program, booked myself a hotel room for an entire week, and packed my bags. On a weekend, an overnight bus journey transported me away from the hustle and bustle of the city to the peace and tranquility of the quaint little abode of clouds tucked away in the mountains.

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“Very good! I am certain that the program will help you,” she exclaims and bids me goodbye. “Let me walk with you for a while,” I offer. She refuses. “Do not waste your time with me. Walk around the town. Eat *momos* and *shabhaleys.* Drink some butter tea. Visit the Tibet bakery. They sell [4] delicious doughnuts,” she suggests. I giggle. She grins.

“I want to ask you something,” I express. “Please go on,” she says, looking a bit worked up not knowing what I might ask. “Where did you get your knapsack from?” I ask. “I like it,” I

say. “Oh! This one?” she laughs aloud pointing at the knapsack. “My granddaughter handed it down to me. She bought a new one,” she chirps. I chuckle as my guess turns out to be true.

After pausing for a minute, she adds, “Two years after losing Pema, I had a son. He has a daughter now. I named my granddaughter Pema.” Her eyes twinkle. I can sense the joy in her voice. I can’t stop myself from giving her a tight hug. She reciprocates. I look at her wrinkled face one last time before she turns and walks away.

I watch her walk down the road leaning on the walking stick and disappearing into the darkness of the evening. I head towards the bustling street lined with shops, swarming with tourists — choosing, bargaining, hollering, and chattering. I long for a cup of coffee and a sugary donut. I head towards Tibet Cafe whistling and humming a favourite song, to my astonishment. I imagine Ayon beside me, holding my hand. I close my eyes for a moment and recall his calm face. My heart swells up with an inexplicable joy.

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Amrita is a researcher. Her creative writings have appeared in the Indian Literature by Sahitya Akademi, New Asian Writing, Borderless Journal, and an anthology published by MSN & Random House India. Amrita's creative writings are inspired by people, places, and stories she encounters during her travels, especially fieldwork for her academic research. Her experience and memories of growing up in a small town of Assam in the 1990s are also reflected in her writings.